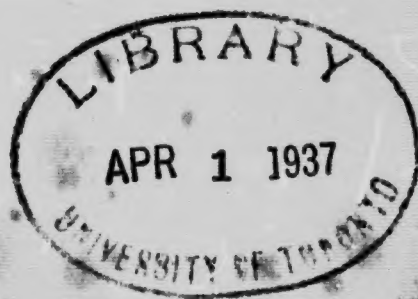


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The Rev. Dr. Henderson and His Critics

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The Rev. Dr. Henderson and His Critics

"Neither do men put new wine into old bottles: else the bottles break, and the wine runneth out, and the bottles perish: but they put new wine into new bottles and both are preserved."—Matt. 9: 17.

Honoured leader of a church in this city has burdened his soul on the subject of the fate of those who offered up their lives and their all for the establishment of freedom and righteousness upon the earth. He has come to the perfectly sane, just and humane conclusion that, having made the supreme sacrifice, they are forever safe. Having sealed their beliefs, their ideals with their heart's blood, whatever their respective pasts may have been, they will be found acceptable in the sight of God. All must be well with them on any sea or shore.

One should suppose that this, the belief of the average person, would attract no particular attention, and that, in fact, it would receive the hearty commendation of all thoughtful and tender-hearted men and women. To imagine for a moment that a fine lad of twenty or twenty-one is suddenly parted, not only from the sights and sounds of earth and from those intimately dear to

him, but from the Almighty Love as well, and consigned for all time to a fate of horror and gloom, merely because not of the standardized type of believer, is a conclusion which can only be stigmatized as ghastly.

It sometimes seems as though everything in the world had changed but theology: as though the dark, monkish superstitions of the middle ages had found their last refuge and support in the minds and hearts of the present day exponents of religion. And such, in fact, is the case. Instead of coming out in favour of the just and humane view I have mentioned, a perfect fusillade of antiquated ecclesiastical artillery has been directed against this fresh disturber of the orthodox peace. All the old wraiths and goblins of the medieval imagination are conjured up to accomplish their dreary work of spiritual and emotional intimidation. All the old scholastic dogmas—the so-called need of atonement on account of the lapse of the first mythical man in the dim beginnings of creation—the absolute necessity of a specific, stereotyped, standardized kind of belief in order to get right with The Creator are revamped. For what end? To what end? To increase the joy of life? To nerve the heart of the slacker and the coward? To give to us all in this hour of mingled agony and pride a firmer belief in the ultimate good of the universe and of our lives as a part of the universe? Nothing of the kind! But to maintain arrogantly, tenaciously and defiantly the unchangeable character

of inherited dogmatic theology. The warm and tender instincts of the human heart, it would seem, must be sacrificed to an inherited form of words. Sooner than change the creed or admit that it is capable of amendment a conclusion is arrived at and maintained which makes of the divine love a mockery, and of the divine justice a farce.

Certainly the instincts of our hearts are right! Beyond all question the man who offers up his life in defence of what he conceives to be the dearest thing on earth, if there be a God and an hereafter, and I believe in both, passes out, though it may be through the purgatorial fires of physical pain, to some wider stage of being, and finds compensation in a life of higher and finer endeavour. To say otherwise would be, in effect, to assert that victory will ultimately fall to the powers of darkness and despair. Compared with this dreary and heart-breaking conclusion of theology, the belief of the naked materialist that death ends all for all is simply merciful. What is the use of speaking of the love of God and hell in the same breath, anyhow? If by "The love of God" be meant the ultimate divine intention, the deep and steady movement of conscious life towards beauty, truth, freedom and righteousness, then it must in the end prevail over all obstacles. It is our faith that it will so prevail, that,—

"What began best can't end worse,
Or what God blessed once proved accursed."

In a sense, we liberals have but a casual interest in this tragic controversy. We long ago made up our minds that mere argument is futile and somewhat profane. How, indeed, can one argue about the love of God or the tender life of the spirit? Religion is a spirit, a life, as Jesus taught. Our traditions are of a high intellectual character and our inspirations to holy living are derived not mainly from any ancient book or creed, but chiefly from the world about us and the soul within us. We believe that God is a very present help in time of trouble, and that the ideals that cheer us all along the path of our earthly pilgrimage are bright visions let down to guide us to safety and peace. But when the deepest instincts of the human soul are outraged we resent it, and we are not afraid or ashamed to bear our witness to the truth.

As I said in the beginning, everything in the world has changed but theology. That has only seemed to change. Here and there a brave soul—like the preacher who is the storm-centre of the present controversy—dares to throw off the almost intolerable weight of an out-grown past, and, occasionally, some church will swing over to a more humane and liberal interpretation of the creeds; but raise the question of a radical change of belief in any of the numerous ministerial gatherings which take place from time to time, and what a fluttering of the dovescotes! What valiant assertions as to the unchangeableness of the church's historic point of view!

Now theology has very little to do with religion. There is absolutely no theology in The Gospel. There is in the writings of Paul; in fact, Paul's letters are the great standby of theology. But in the so-called Synoptics there is no theology. There is no theology, but there is abundance of religion. And a hearty, human, brotherly, neighbourly kind of a religion it is—all-embracing and universal. It has the breath of the sea in it, the lift of mountains, the melancholy splendour of dying sunsets, the confused and lively staccato talk of animated human groups and the darling laughter of little children. It is easy to believe in the love of God after reading the parable of the prodigal son, or that of the lost sheep, or the tender incident of the Magdalene or of the good Samaritan, or the cry of the great blazer of the moral trail, "Come unto Me and I will give you rest!" "Come unto Me, for I can show you that rest there is none for your weary feet save at the end of a straight and narrow way. You are unhappy and I know why you are unhappy. It is because you are proud and self-contained, or because your mind is set on animal things—the things that moth corrupts and that thieves steal; or because you pride yourself upon your pharisaical orthodoxy or are unsocial and hold yourself apart as a privileged being, or have made of light darkness and have forgotten the very meaning of innocent things. I call you back, all you wandering ones, to your true and lasting peace—the simple doing

of the will of God." Where is the theology in all this? What has speculation as to what God will do with the soul after that the body of this flesh shall have been destroyed to do with the accomplishment of noble tasks now?

The core of the whole controversy centres right here. Theology is speculative; religion is practical—it is life and conduct, and spontaneous, inevitable belief in those ideals that make a sweet and irresistible appeal to our nobler natures. Metaphysics and theology are both in the same boat. One is no better nor higher than the other. I class paleontology and theology together—they both deal with fossil forms. The metaphysician speculates about the nature of thought; the theologian speculates about the nature of God; both are speculations, interesting perhaps, fascinating, if you like, but speculations all the same. In the old days men went off into desert places and took up their abode in caves in order the better to meditate on the being and nature of God. They didn't do much harm—though it was a rather unsocial way of being religious—but most certainly they did very little if any good. Prof. Bradley, of Merton, in "Appearance and Reality" reduces the whole universe to certain logical forms of thought. Doubtless he thoroughly enjoyed writing his thorny thesis—it is a form of enjoyment doing that sort of thing—but as nobody reads his book save a few philosophers, and they only for the purpose of denying its fundamental contention, one may fairly doubt

the wisdom of his choice. A rogue could write an excellent book of speculative theology—not all the popes were saints—but a rogue could not write a great and moving hymn or a spiritual deliverance that would rank with the 40th chapter of Isaiah. Theology is not religion. It is to religion what the parasite is to the host, what the camp-follower is to the marching army. What right has any man to speculate as to what God will or will not do; or to thunder forth that in such and such circumstances He will do so and so? Who has a warrant to speak for God? Who ever had? “Who knoweth the mind of God or who being His counsellor hath taught Him?” asks Isaiah in a superb passage, and the question is still unanswered. “An incomprehensible God is the centre of all adoration.” Could we perfectly define God we would cease to worship, for worship is the child of mystery. “Surely,” cried Isaiah, “Thou art a God that hidest Thyself.” The bane, the very curse and burden of theology is that it would rob us of the last mystery: it would leave God naked and open to human thought. Alexander the Great, it is said, sat down and wept because there were no more kingdoms to conquer. But if the last beautiful mystery has been solved, if the creeds comprise the be-all and the end-all of human striving, what a truly pitiable ending to human endeavor! To save our souls from the wrath of an implacable and offended Deity, to make sure by possession of the right pass-word—a sort of

theological "Open Sesame!"—of our eternal felicity, to reduce the whole of art of science, of philosophy, of politics, to subordinate levels of interest would seem on this hypothesis to be the main interest of life. Well, they tried it in the middle ages. They murdered or silenced the scientist and the reformer; they limited art to the portrayal of saintly postures and emotions; they taxed the common people to death and even dared to attempt the intimidation of secular governments. And how much better off was society for all their wretched fanaticisms? History tells us of the result—of the democratic uprising of the Reformation; of the peasant's war under John of Leyden; of the glorious sunrise of the renaissance; of the French revolution and the triumphant entry of science and democracy. The narrow monkish creedists had their day and went stale because what they sought to accomplish was impossible. They sought not only to fetter the human spirit, but actually to fetter God—to tie Him up in a rigid creed; to limit Him to a definition of their own making; to say to The Almighty, "Thus far shalt Thou go and no further, and here in this Confession of Faith or Encyclical shalt Thou come to a full logical stop."

But God is simply the eternal life and cannot be checked in His goings forth or defined at any particular point of time in any age, by any individual or church. God is Thought's open sea whose shores no finite mind may ever fully explore. In the true sense, all progress

up to date is but a part of His ways; and this includes not only the spiritual conquests of mankind, but every fresh advance in science every new revelation of beauty, every widening and sweetening and broadening of the social organism, every original advance in literature. The sum of human progress up to date is the last majestic revelation of God.

"Our God is marching on." To think of the whole problem as being solved in The Confession of Faith or The Methodist Book of Discipline, or in the preposterous dogma of papal infallibility, is nothing short of monstrous. If I supposed that such outworn, illogical and infantile definitions of religion really represented the final end of thought's endeavour as touching God and out-topped the majestic world of modern science and culture, I would advocate the jettisoning of the whole modern cargo and a return to the dark days of the papacy. If these repellant doctrines are true then science is a lie and modern freedom a plague and democracy a disaster, and the sooner we forget them and banish them the better. Who is prepared to advocate this extreme but honest and logical course? Not a soul of them all! The very men who speak of eternal alienation from the face of God for the young patriot who, in the cant phrase, "Has not accepted Christ," enjoy all the fruits of civilization, and placidly accept them as their due. The men who, by their vicious reasoning are slated through to hell, protect them at this very hour. Had it

not been for these glorious heroes the Hun would even now be thundering at the gate. What a deterrent to recruiting! All the miserable coward needs to put forth is the plea that conversion has not yet come his way; and that while his country has a right to demand that he shall rise up in the defence of freedom, it has no right to demand that he imperil his eternal welfare in doing so. What answer can be made to his contention?

I submit the iniquity is in the inherited creed. I affirm that for a puny mortal to define or to even attempt to define the movements of God's mind in His dealings with the souls He has created is nothing short of blasphemy; and that the only attitude of mind and soul to assume is one of humble, childlike trust in the vast life of which each one is the conscious child. "To this man will I look even to him who is of a humble and contrite spirit and who trembles at my rebuke." Coins of expression like that ring like minted gold on the counters of experience! To sum up, theology is simply speculation. Speculation is a purely intellectual process. Speculation of any kind has no inhering moral qualities. It is often a mere lazy indulgence—save when it is trained scientific speculation and then it is most valuable. Religion, on the other hand, is the attempt to discover and obey the highest demand of the universe as touching rational and spiritual creatures like ourselves. "the Highest is the measure of the man." It comprises realities, to name

only a few, like honour, fortitude, courage, tenderness, sympathy, love, aspiration, reverence, prayer and faith.

"Canst thou by searching find out God?" asks Job. Has this question ever been answered? I do not know God. I can but kneel in prayer before that awful reality. I do not know God. But I know what love is. I found it long ago at the knees of a tender and resolute mother, in the heart of an intimate friend and comrade, in the adoring glances of little children. I do not know what God's great designs are. But I know what beauty is. I found her drenched by the salt spray upon far northern coasts; I heard her voice in the whisper of pines and reeds; I caught a glimpse of her fleeting loveliness among the high mountains, and in the shattered moonbeams on the lakes and in the refulgence of sun-stricken streams. I have stood in her presence breathless in the Louvre, and have almost cried from pure joy at the revelation she made of herself in that room of awful loveliness which shrines the frieze of the Parthenon. I do not know what is to be the final end of society on this planet, nor of my own final end. But I know that here many gallant gentlemen have lived and died; that it is only through the practice of a noble law of self-sacrifice that the race ever moves forward; that against the spiritual will the awful powers of heredity, ignorance and animal selfishness fight in vain; that the good is permanent and the evil impermanent; that

righteousness is the last resolution of power, since it is law established in the triumphant will; that the ideal of perfection which haunts us like a beautiful vision is never reached in the short span of our lives and that we die desiring it. And knowing all these things, I am well content to leave the final end of the world and of all souls and of my own soul in the hands of Almighty love and power, in the simple faith that some day I shall know even as also I am known."

There is one thing which these men who draw the sword of conflict, when the creed is menaced from the direction of reason and common-sense, thoroughly understand and that is that if they give up hell they give up theology, since it is on the foundation of hell, that the whole miserable structure rests. Once emancipate the human soul from dread of a future doom and religion becomes, as it ought to become, a simple, sweet, human and understandable thing—the gaining here and now of that lofty vision which transforms conduct and of that love which casts out all fear.

